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RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 06 BEIRUT 003782

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/07/2016

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: BERRI FOR BOTH SINIORA AND CABINET  
EXPANSION, SEEKS SAUDI-SYRIAN SOLUTION

REF: BEIRUT 3775

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

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11. (C) In a meeting with the Ambassador, a curiously jubilant Speaker Berri laid out his positions: he is for the current GOL, including PM Siniora, staying; opposed to any confidence or no-confidence vote or a new Ministerial Declaration; but in favor of the opposition obtaining a "blocking minority" in the cabinet (one-third-plus-one), due to their representation by 44 percent of the Parliament. Berri would offer the PM guarantees that the opposition would not employ their one-third-plus-one to force the resignation of the cabinet; those guarantees might include assurances from regional governments, and Berri talked up the need for a Saudi-Syrian agreement. Berri would not consider using the Parliament to change the President under current circumstances, in opposition to March 8-Aoun. Berri categorically ruled out calling a new Parliamentary session now -- doing so would provoke MP resignations -- and assured us that Hizballah would take no action against UNIFIL or to split the LAF. In a private conversation with the Ambassador at the end, he said that his bottom line regarding the Special Tribunal for Lebanon never appear before the Lebanese parliament. He also suggested Michel Aoun has a deeper relationship with Syria that Aoun will acknowledge and pushed hard for Syrian-Saudi reconciliation as the key to solve Lebanon's crisis. End Summary.

LAUGHING ON THE WAY  
TO THE POLITICAL GRAVEYARD  
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12. (C) The Ambassador called on Chamber of Deputies Speaker Nabih Berri at his Ain-al-Tina office on December 6. Berri's advisor Ali Hamdan as well as his brother Mahmoud Berri also attended the meeting; Polchief was notetaker. In contrast to the generally gloomy mood in Beirut, Berri was in a visibly ebullient mood. The Ambassador joked to Berri that, with President ("Rais al-Jumhuria") Lahoud in diplomatic isolation and Prime Minister ("Rais al-Wuzara") Siniora surrounded by protesters, Berri as Speaker of the Parliament ("Rais Majlis al-Nuab") is the only "Rais" of the three presidents remaining with whom we could meet. Berri, who has often been reticent to meet with USG visitors, welcomed the Ambassador warmly and, in fact, admitted into his office an unusually

large gaggle of press photographers for a photo spray, laughing and joking with the Ambassador as the cameras rolled. Security at Ain-al-Tina was noticeably high.

13. (C) Berri also encouraged us to call on Siniora, saying "it will be good for him." He brushed aside the suggestion that a highly visible U.S. Embassy motorcade winding its way through protesters to the Serail could undermine Siniora, as his opponents denounce him as a U.S. puppet. (Note: We are not visiting Siniora now at the PM's own request, who fears that our visits would simply reinforce the image of him as a U.S. proxy. But we are in regular communication with Siniora by phone and via advisors. End note.)

#### REDUCING MEDIA INCITEMENT

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14. (C) The Ambassador offered condolences to Berri on the death of an Amal supporter who was shot by a suspected Sunni extremist the night of December 3. But these sorts of incidents are inevitable in the tense situation that has been created by the ongoing demonstrations. "Thank God," Berri replied, "that if that had to happen -- if it had to happen -- that it happened to an Amal supporter" and not to a Hizballah or Mustaqbal (Hariri movement) member. Berri agreed with the Ambassador that feelings are very tense in Beirut and that any violence could quickly get out of hand. Berri assessed that the competing television stations Mustaqbal and Manar are both pushing extreme views and inciting their respective March 14 and opposition supporters to ever-higher emotions. He told us he is embarked on an effort to persuade both stations to lower their tone.

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#### AL-QAEDA THREAT GROWING

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15. (S) Al-Qaeda is a growing concern, the Ambassador informed Berri, and while their operatives would gladly target the U.S. Embassy they would, in Lebanon, also likely target a Shia leader like Berri, especially when the Shia are now seen as attacking Lebanon's Sunni politicians and institutions. The Speaker replied that in the eyes of al-Qaeda, the Christians, Jews and Sunni Muslims are "people of the Book," and therefore (generally) immune to killing but, he lamented, Shia Muslims are fair game. The Ambassador underscored that Hizballah's actions to destabilize Lebanon and threaten Sunnis and their interests here are completely counterproductive to Shia interests, as they can be used to recruit and incite al-Qaeda to action. Berri agreed.

#### BERRI LIFTS SERAIL SIEGE

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16. (C) Berri spent much of the meeting recounting for us his efforts throughout the crisis, and throughout the duration of the Siniora government, to mediate between the two opposing sides and attempt to stave off a confrontation. Apparently forgetting he had also talked with the Ambassador by phone on the subject, he told us that on December 1, the first full day of the opposition "sit-in" in Riad al-Solh Square, he was awakened from a nap (either an unlikely or an irresponsible activity by a Shia leader on that particular day) by a frantic call from the Prime Minister: the Grand Serail was surrounded and cut off from the rest of the city. Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) G-2 Georges Khoury and Commander Michel Sleiman also called, with the latter telling Berri he "would have to attack" to drive the protesters away from the Serail's entrances. Berri told Sleiman he would have a path to the Serail open within 30 minutes, faster than the LAF could. He accomplished it in 35, he told us, by liaising with March 8 leaders.

BERRI WANTS ARMY TO BE NEUTRAL,  
WON'T PARTICIPATE IN SPLITTING LAF

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¶7. (C) The Speaker reported that he had also told Sleiman that, in the event that large-scale arrests become necessary, he must act equitably toward all parties. If Amal supporters create problems, they should face arrest in equal measure with supporters of every other group. When the Ambassador asked whether Hizballah would order Shia members of the LAF and civil service to leave their posts, Berri said that if that should happen he would order that they remain in their jobs. Splitting the LAF was a red line Berri would not permit to be crossed.

ASSIGNING BLAME FOR CURRENT MESS  
TO MARCH 2005 DEMONSTRATIONS  
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¶8. (C) Berri could not resist revisiting the events of March 2005 with an air of I-told-you-so. The March 14 crowd had "prepared the ground" for the current demonstrations then, he averred, with their own (anti-Syrian) sit-in of Martyr's Square, where small groups of youth camped out from March until the departure of the Syrian troops in late April. Due to diplomatic pressure, especially from the West, the demonstrators were held back from turning President Lahoud out of the Baabda Palace and the March 14 revolution was not completed. The Ambassador reminded Berri that an attempt to remove Lahoud by force, especially before the Syrian army left Lebanon, could have caused a civil war and that diplomatic representatives had, in fact, given that message to those leading the 2005 demonstrations. "You do not fear a civil war now?" Berri quipped, to which the Ambassador noted that diplomatic representatives were repeating the same warning now. Walid Jumblatt (who was in 2005 perhaps the most zealous of those readying a march on Baabda) understood the situation well, he added -- the Presidency is the key that unlocks all the doors of power in Lebanon.

POSTPONEMENT OF STREET ACTION;  
PROMOTING SAUDI-SYRIAN RECONCILIATION  
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¶9. (C) Berri shared with us more of his mediation efforts that, in his view, had deferred street protests twice already. He first proposed his end-of-Ramadan national consultations on August 14, he said, as March 8 leaders were first talking of street action to topple Siniora. His push for dialogue and then for consultative talks delayed the resort to the street up to the present time. Berri also pushed for help from King Abdullah, he added, during his early October visit to Saudi Arabia. He told Abdullah that Bashar Asad, "is making mistakes, and you need to be a father to him." The secret to keeping order in Lebanon, Berri claimed, is Saudi-Syrian agreement and reconciliation, and that lofty goal (at least as it relates to the Lebanon question) was the purpose of his trip.

ONLY AOUN BLOC TO BE ADMITTED  
INTO THE (ENLARGED) CABINET CLUB  
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¶10. (C) Berri's current position, he told us, is the same as it was going into the failed consultation sessions of early November. He is for the current government staying in power; for Prime Minister Siniora staying in power; he is against any confidence or no-confidence vote in Parliament; and against any new Ministerial Declaration. (Note: the current Declaration, issued at the formation of the Siniora government in mid-2005, expresses among other things support for Hizballah's "National Resistance" and its right to possess heavy weapons. So keeping the existing declaration, which Siniora and March 14 ministers would no longer support, is hardly the concession Berri suggests. End note.) Berri is also against bringing "anyone new" -- i.e., any new opposition party -- into the cabinet, with the exception of

Michel Aoun. He specifically excluded Marada Party leader and ex-Interior Minister Suleiman Franjieh, and said that he refused to talk to other regime opponents such as former PM Omar Karami and Druze opposition leader Talal Arslan.

INSISTING ON THE PARLIAMENT  
WOULD TRIGGER MP RESIGNATIONS  
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¶11. (C) The Ambassador pointed out that the Chamber of Deputies has met only twice in the current legislative session, which expires December 31. The Speaker replied that he had also repeatedly refused the demands of March 14 leaders to convene a parliament session in response to the current political crisis. To do so, he said, would provoke the resignation of 40-50 deputies and rob the body of its legitimacy. Additionally, the current cabinet already has the confidence of the Parliament, so a confidence vote is beside the point. As for the legislative agenda, he added, "one day, I will use the Parliament to correct everything necessary." With President Lahoud "outside the law," however, attempts to legislate or to use Parliament to resolve the political crisis would be fruitless.

INSISTENCE ON BLOCKING MINORITY  
BUT OFFERING (VAGUE) GUARANTEES  
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¶12. (C) On the cabinet, Berri is convinced that the opposition has at least the right to a one-third-plus-one representation. Berri cited the 57 deputies, or 44 percent of the Chamber, belonging to March 8 and argued that one-third-plus-one of the cabinet was in fact under what the opposition deserved. He did not respond to the Ambassador's reference to Saad Hariri's quip that, in that case, the majority deserved 56 percent of the presidency. In return, Berri added, the government would have to receive guarantees that the opposition deputies would not withdraw from the cabinet and precipitate its fall. "What collateral or guarantee can I offer," Berri added, other than a solemn oath. With Lebanon's current lack of trust, regional and international guarantees are the only option, he said. "The real problem," he again mentioned, "lies between Saudi Arabia and Syria."

¶13. (C) A new President could be among the guarantees, the Ambassador suggested. Berri replied that the same suggestion had been made by the French Ambassador and by March 14 leaders, but he categorically ruled out using the Parliament

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to replace Lahoud in the current climate. He would have to change the constitution again, he said, and to do so in the face of Hizballah and Aounist opposition would constitute a confrontation that would be in the interest of no one, neither in Lebanon nor abroad.

COY ON MOUSSA PROPOSAL  
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¶14. (C) Berri mentioned Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa's proposal of 19 government ministers, 10 opposition ministers, and one additional "neutral" minister nominated by Berri with Siniora's blessing. Staying studiously coy, Berri refused either to commit himself or reject Moussa's proposal. (See reftel for comments on Moussa's proposal. March 14 leaders fear Berri will manipulate the appointment of the "neutral" minister in order to convince Hizballah and Aoun that they have, in fact, acquired the blocking minority.)

UNIFIL AND INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS  
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¶15. (C) At several times in the conversation, the Ambassador reviewed with Berri just how dangerous the current atmosphere is and how much the language of incitement used in the

demonstrations and in the media was hurting the chances of finding a non-violent solution. While supporting the right to demonstrate, Berri reiterated his loathing for the confrontational language used by opposition speakers at the sit-in, in particular those comments that appeared to be directed against the USG. "I'm their ally, even if I don't like to oppose your policies."

¶16. (C) Berri similarly condemned the rhetorical attacks on the expanded mission of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Berri told opposition organizers that they must do nothing to compromise the unity of the LAF or threaten UNIFIL. He assured us that, as he had told UNIFIL official Milos Strugar in a recent meeting, no relationship could be closer than that between Amal and UNIFIL, which has been on the ground in south Lebanon for over two decades. Security Council Resolution 1701 is inviolable, he declared, and nothing will happen to UNIFIL. "I would resign first." Furthermore, "is UNIFIL more threatened by Israel or by Hizballah?" Berri asked. "Who attacked the Germans, who made provocative overflights and mock bombing raids, and who is causing problems in Ghajjar?" he inquired. Berri made it clear that attacking UNIFIL was a red line he insisted he would not cross.

AVOIDING PARLIAMENTARY ROLE  
FOR SPECIAL TRIBUNAL FOR LEBANON  
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¶17. (C) At the end of the meeting, the Ambassador asked to see Berri alone. Presumably to avoid any listening devices, the Speaker ushered the Ambassador to staff chairs on the opposite side of the room. The Ambassador asked Berri for his bottom line regarding the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. Avoid the parliament, Berri said (citing examples of international treaties -- including the notorious 1969 Cairo Agreement -- Lebanon has signed that never needed parliamentary ratification). He urged that either the Security Council create the tribunal on its own or that Article 52 of Lebanon's constitution be carefully studied so that no parliamentary ratification is needed. The Ambassador asked whether Berri would support a tribunal created by either of those methods, given that surely some Lebanese and the Syrians would use the absence of parliamentary action to denounce the establishment of the tribunal. Berri said that he would not oppose the tribunal; he just could not be part of its establishment.

HINTS OF AOUN'S COOPERATION  
WITH THE SYRIANS  
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¶18. (S) The Ambassador asked whether the Speaker wasn't worried that March 14 might make a deal with Michel Aoun, obtaining Aoun's approval of the tribunal in exchange for an Aoun presidency. That would leave the Shia isolated in the presidential elections; the Speaker would be reduced to a

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minor player in choosing the next president, in such a scenario. Berri (whose hatred for Aoun is well known) looked shocked and asked whether the Ambassador had discussed such a possibility with March 14 leaders. Responding negatively, the Ambassador noted that he was merely thinking aloud: at least theoretically, trading Aoun's support for the tribunal with March 14 support for an Aoun presidency seemed one promising way to break the current impasse. Berri hissed that Syria would never permit Aoun to make such a deal. The Ambassador asked Berri whether, then, Aoun had deep cooperation with the Syrians. Berri looked at the ceiling and did not respond.

SYRIA-SAUDI RECONCILIATION  
KEY TO WHAT AILS LEBANON  
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¶19. (C) As the one-on-one meeting came to a close, Berri returned to a theme he had touched upon throughout the meeting: the terrible state of relations between Saudi Arabia and Syria. "If you listened to me," Berri chided, the United States would have promoted reconciliation between the two Arab states. Such reconciliation would have permitted a replacement of Emile Lahoud and a solution to the current political impasse. Syria knows how important Siniora's government is to King Abdullah; since Saudi Arabia refuses to deal with Bashar, Syria thus is responding by making life difficult in Lebanon. The Ambassador feigned astonishment that Berri was admitting the depth of Syrian interference in Lebanon. Berri growled that he has said "repeatedly" that it is impossible to kick Emile Lahoud out of Baabda without some kind of signal from Damascus. "I have told you, no one wants to get rid of Emile Lahoud more than I do. Help me -- talk to Syria about it."

RE-EMERGENCE OF (RESIGNED)  
FOREIGN MINISTER SALLOUKH  
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¶20. (C) As the Speaker and the Ambassador left the Speaker's office, (resigned) Foreign Minister Fawzi Salloukh (who had been kept cooling his heels as the Ambassador's meeting went half hour beyond schedule) leaped out of Berri's waiting room. Salloukh warmly greeted the Ambassador, complete with the Lebanese triple cheek kiss. Amused by the scene, Berri said to Salloukh, "Fawzi, I thought when you were still in the cabinet, it wasn't the 'Feltman government.' But when I look at you, now I think maybe it was already!" Salloukh looked chagrined.

COMMENT  
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¶21. (C) We don't know how to interpret Berri's joyful, teasing mood, a complete contrast to the depressed, downbeat spirits he conveyed to the Ambassador by phone over the weekend. Given the intensity of Berri's hatred for Hizballah and its way of politics (so different from Berri's traditional Lebanese patronage-spoils system), does Berri sense that Hizballah is overplaying its hand? Or does he feel that he has hitched himself to the winning Hizballah-Aoun side? Was his happiness, then, good news or bad news for our interests? We guess that part of his soaring morale must be the realization that the parliamentary calendar (with expiration of the regular session only three weeks away) means that he has escaped dealing with the tribunal question, and thus provoking the annoyance of Syria and Iran, for now.

¶22. (C) Like March 14 contacts (reftel), we are skeptical about Berri's claims that Syrian-Saudi reconciliation is the miracle cure to Lebanon's problems or that we can promote a decent president by engaging Damascus. Berri is probably trying to exploit our concern about the Lebanese situation to trick us into giving him something he can deliver to Damascus, to prove that, despite declining influence in Lebanon, he has continuing worth to the Syrians.

¶23. (C) Finally, while we teased the Speaker that he is the last of the three "presidents" we can visit, in fact all three of Lebanon's primary constitutional bodies are currently dysfunctional. Berri himself has participated in

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varying degrees of willingness to crippling them all. The presidency is now irrelevant, given Lahoud's Syrian-directed mandate extension (done under a Berri-led parliament) and Berri's refusal to help remove him. The cabinet is rendered politically suspect because Berri participated in manufacturing the Shia resignations. And now Berri refuses to call the parliament to session, a move that perhaps saves the parliament (by allowing him to evade any Syrian orders to have the Shia and Aoun MPs resign) but makes it incapable of

addressing current problems. Berri could use his parliamentary bloc and ministers to be part of Lebanon's political solution, starting with removing Emile Lahoud from office (which Berri's bloc combined with March 14 deputies could accomplish) and approving the special tribunal. Alas, we do not see him playing that role.

¶24. (C) Someday, we would like to have a conversation with Berri, where we note the irony of the Shia politicians complaining about weak constitutional bodies, when the Shia political forces themselves have done so much to prevent the effectiveness of those bodies. The much-criticized weakness of the Siniora cabinet, for example, is actually a concerted effort by Fouad Siniora to ensure that he has obtained buy-in from Hizballah and Amal for cabinet decisions. When all but two of the 4,800-plus cabinet decisions passed since July 2005 were adopted by cabinet consensus, Berri's arguments about the need for a blocking minority to prevent the unfettered ambition of March 14 hardly sound sincere or legitimate.

FELTMAN